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Interview with

Peter Bachratý

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By Tom Nicholson, Spectator staff

The Slovak Spectator (TSS): Amrop Jenewein has a think-tank in Brussels. What's a human capital and EU affairs firm doing with a think tank?

Peter Bachratý (PB): We understood after a couple of successful years in business that if we and the whole business sector wanted to be more professional, we had to become involved in some kind of philanthropy, something that would help to create a better business and public administration environment. We used our existing European activities and our Brussels office to work towards this goal.

With the think tank we are working at both the local and national levels, by which I mean we are supporting improvements in public administration and governance as well as domestic affairs and innovative personnel politics, which means more effective management of people and programs within Slovakia, and a more effective foreign policy for the country abroad.

Concerning our initiative, it is interesting that until now Slovakia has had only one or two people in top positions in the European Commission. We should have many more. Part of the problem is the approach of the EC, since they don't really want a director general from Slovakia, or any other of the new countries for that matter. In this environment, Slovakia needs to be more ambitious and to want it [a stronger leadership role in the EU]. It's not an easy process, but it's made more difficult by a lack of coordination within the government itself as well as with other levels.

TSS: Is the core of the problem that Slovakia doesn't have people in high positions in the EU, or is there a deeper problem than that?

PB: The problem goes deeper. EPPP - European Partnership for Personnel Policy [the name of Amrop Jenewein's think tank] and its EU Personnel Politics initiative have urged the government to create a European affairs strategy, a document that would lay out our short-term, mid-term and long-term strategic interests. We are such a small country that we have to do all of this even more efficiently than larger countries, which have more power to enforce their interests. Smaller countries have to use their brains if they want to get anywhere.

TSS: Why do you think Slovakia still lacks a formal strategy towards the European Union? It would seem to be a fairly standard way to begin.

PB: I think that the Slovak government has been involved in so many economic and social reforms that it simply didn't have the time to devote any attention to this area. There is also a lack of interest in strategic planning in foreign policy, and a belief that economic and social reforms are urgent matters that take precedence over softer areas. But it's now high time to change this attitude - it was already an urgent issue even a year ago.

There was also some euphoria at the time Slovakia joined the EU, as there was in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. I think we fell asleep at the wheel for a couple of years and we're only now starting to wake up and ask "what now?" The problem is we don't really have many people who understand foreign policy issues, and

there have been far too many urgent local problems that pushed foreign policy management to the back burner.

TSS: Is part of the problem a general lack of talented people in the Slovak state sector or on the labour market? Some foreign investors have complained of the difficulty of finding skilled labour, while the education system has also been criticized for being out of touch with the needs of the job market.

PB: In some ways this could be true. However, besides us there are other EU policy experts in Brussels working for other institutions. They wait for the minister or the cabinet to call for a plan to be drawn up, and to invite them to help shape the priorities and then put the plan into effect. We call this the "new EU personnel policy". First you need to create your priority goals, and then you can create a structure at the Foreign Ministry and other ministries, at the

In one year, the biggest problem for many entrepreneurs and companies will be the environment directives and liberalization directives, which have to be adopted into the national legislation and to be respected by business. Another area is competition issues. Our private sector doesn't know how to fight competition cases in Brussels. Thirdly, we should be getting much more involved in strategic issues like energy. Slovakia right now is key to the oil and gas future of Europe and the future diversification of supplies. We are a really important country for Russia as well as the EU, and we should remember this. We should use this importance to push through our interests in a positive way. But I haven't seen any real discussion of energy supplies diversification in Slovakia, and I think the government should pay more attention to these issues. If everything goes as it should on both the EU and the national level, very soon we will have a joint energy policy. We are an important country, so we really should be identifying our interests and lobbying for them.

We are now doing this think-tank, and we are considering setting up a Central and Eastern European energy security think-tank together with our Polish, Czech and Hungarian partners, which would be active both in Brussels and on the national levels in these countries. Still, we can do as many initiatives as we want, but the country will only benefit if the next government pays more attention to these crucial foreign policy issues.

TSS: Does it strike you as odd that Slovakia's policy towards the EU is so nebulous when its foreign policy towards the Balkan countries, Belarus and Ukraine has been so clearly defined?

PB: I think there has been an absolute lack of communication in this area between the EU itself and the people who draw up these strategies. It really takes time to understand how Brussels works and what the real possibilities of EU membership are. Brussels is definitely not like Washington. Sometimes decisions are made there, while at other times they are made at the national level of member countries, and it's often not clear what things happen at the national level and what happens at the on European level. Sometimes the experts who write these strategy papers don't have the networks they need. Naturally, even senior officers at the Foreign Ministry don't have the experience and the connections that we have. That's why we are urging them to create an advisory board. It would be so easy - you simply approach the five top experts and get them involved. We would even do it pro bono, because we know that it would be beneficial for us and for the country as well to have some strategy. I think the greatest problem is the lack of a support network for the experts that the ministries have.

Regarding our policy towards Belarus and Ukraine, this is something I really like about our foreign policy, that after all those years during which we wrestled with problems similar to those they are facing now, like how to build democracy, we have made it our mission to share our experiences with these countries. For these countries we are also a go-between to larger coun-

Industry Voices will run for the next three months as a regular feature in which industry professionals comment on the challenges facing the next cabinet.



Courtesy of Amrop Jenewein Group

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ries. One of the experiences we can share is how hard it is to change people's mindsets.

TSS: Are we being a little hard on Slovakia, when the EU itself doesn't really know what to do about its major issues, such as the constitution or Turkey's membership?

PB: No, I think that's an excuse. We could still send a clear message on whether we support Turkey's joining the EU or not, and the same goes for Ukraine. The main difference between British and US foreign policy, on the one hand, and the EU and its members on the other, is that the former lay out really long-term strategies and goals, while the latter has rather short-term policies.

As for the constitution, I think it came too early, because the most important thing right now is to integrate the union economically. Many people might think this has already been done, but it hasn't been finished. This is an urgent task, because the EU is losing competitiveness from one day to the next. If you look at India and China, in 20 years they will be the key players and they will be much more competitive.

The member countries of the EU - like Slovakia - can help formulate the main policy areas for the EU, and the first of these should be economic integration and building the open market. For example, the service directive was such a defeat for the liberalization process. It was one of the main things to be achieved by integration. What are we doing in the EU if we aren't fighting for these issues?

When I listened to the party programs before the elections I heard the SDKÚ's [Finance Minister Ivan] Mikloš saying that the SDKÚ should push more for institutional reform and greater competitiveness within the EU. The media thought he was very negative about the EU, but I disagree. Sitting and doing nothing is negative; helping to reform the EU is not negative. Mikloš, [Foreign Minister Eduard] Kukan and [Prime Minister Mikuláš] Dzurinda were the three people who contributed the most to Slovakia's efforts to build an EU strategy. For example, Slovakia's support for the UK and its reform effort, even though the reform failed, showed that we really wanted to reform the system. The main task is to make the EU competitive, both internally and externally. Sometimes our politicians lose heart when they see the huge EU structure with all its levels, but this is why they should be communicating with us, the experts - to work together to create lobbying strategies.

TSS: If you were preparing a list of foreign policy tasks regarding the EU for the next government, what would the main jobs be?

PB: The first would be to create an EU affairs and personnel policy strategy with clear goals. The second would be to create an effective informal lobbying structure with the tools to influence the decisions of EU institutions according our strategic interests. The third would be to focus more on the country's strategic interests, not only in EU affairs but in all international matters and in some specific sectors, by preparing more long-term evaluations of the potential benefits of these sectors for us. Once the country defined clear strategic interests for itself, it would be much easier to lobby for these interests.

Foreign policy should also be more open, a system in which civic initiatives, NGOs and the private sector could get more involved. This is what we need. Right now we don't have an effective system for grouping interests. One thing we would like to do this year is to set up a Slovak business house in Brussels, which could help Slovak businesses and the Foreign Ministry understand what the expectations are of Slovak businesses regarding EU affairs. Many Slovak companies still do not understand either the possibilities or the potential threats of doing business in the EU. I think the negative impact of our EU membership will show up next year and the year after, because Slovak companies are not prepared for many directives. The union will also be welcoming two more members. All of these developments only increase the need for new EU personnel policies. Slovakia has some positions allocated to it within the EC senior management, but we are losing them. It will become more and more difficult to get our people into top positions within the EC. We don't have much time, maybe about nine months. By that time the system should be effective and functioning.

TSS: So the main thing is the human element?

PB: The human and the leadership element, yes. We have to take the international credit we won for launching our reforms and run with it, act like the country of reform that people believe us to be. We have to take more initiative with the EU, just as Dzurinda did in supporting Blair's reform drive. We may be a small country, but we are also a symbol of change. It's time to turn that symbol into action.